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## HUAC Hearings Invite Contempt

By Alan Barth

WHY do the hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities so commonly end in an uproar? Those who attended the inquest of the past week had a chance to see why such an outcome is almost inevitable.

The Committee has been dealing of late—and particularly in the hearings just completed — with vocal, articulate young people who want very much to be heard. The subcommittee conducting these hearings gave them, from their point of view, a perfect platform for protest.

It was anomalous—and, indeed, somewhat ludicrous—to hear subcommittee members urging witnesses, in effect, not to testify, suggesting that they seek the shelter of the Fifth Amendment. But these youngsters wanted no shelter. Call them idealists or call them idiots as you please, they wanted a chance to denounce their Government's policy in Vietnam. The subcommittee catapulted them from obscurity to notoriety, a kind of back door to renown.

THE HUGE House Caucus Room where the hearings were held was full of tension. The audience was made up in major part of congressional staff employes who seemed to have plenty of leisure for this sort of entertainment, in minor part of a fiercely partisan clique for the witnesses. Both factions waited with the kind of expectancy that must have brooded over the Colosseum some centuries ago just before the lions were let loose on the Christians.

All around the rim of the room, at five-foot intervals, stood uniformed police officers; and brawny U.S. marshals in plain clothes seemed nearly as numerous as spectators. One felt slightly in peril of being dragged out if he so much as stood up for a minute to look around.

The conduct of the hearings could hardly be said to invite decorum. Each subcommittee member, ranged on high behind a horseshoe bench, had his own microphone; so did the counsel, and so,

if he could get to it, did the witness. All of them spoke at will, their voices tumbling indistinguishably from loud-speakers. The witnesses and their supporters, many of them admittedly Communists, were boisterous and unmannerly in the extreme. They lost much by their lack of dignity and by the irrational extravagance of their statements.

In all this tumult, Chairman Pool kept banging a gavel incessantly; and when he relinquished the gavel for a moment, Congressman Ichord picked it up and banged away in his turn. It was a little hard to tell who was presiding if anyone.

Nothing short of a shriek stood a chance of being heard in this atmosphere. A lawyer unprepared to shout for his client might just as well have stayed at home. The subcommittee members were shouting—and through microphones; in the occasional interludes of quiet, their voices boomed like cannon.

If a single one of the witnesses had taken the opportunity to voice his convictions quietly and with reason and restraint, he might have made a dramatic impression. But none did.

PART OF the trouble came from sheer ineptitude. No HUAC hearings have had a chairman quite the equal of Joe Pool of Texas since the days of Rep. J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey.

But most of the trouble came from the nature of the inquiry. No part of its purpose was to inquire. The subcommittee in no sense seemed to be seeking information. It was seeking simply to punish some extremely obstreperous young men—by placing them in a public pillory.

The subcommittee has repeatedly asserted that it was interested not in the opinions but only in the conduct of the young men it summoned before it. But the conduct charged to these witnesses—signing petitions, holding mass meetings, raising funds for the Vietcong wounded, trying to persuade American soldiers not to go to Vietnam—are all, with the exception of the last, which was plainly outrageous, pretty closely related to opinion and to the expression of opinion. The theory of the United States Constitution is that the best way to combat bad opinions is through good opinions.

It would be hard, at any rate, to say that the subcommittee hearings gave the Congress much in the way of information. They undoubtedly exposed the boorishness of the student Vietnam protest movement. But they cost the Congress itself a good deal in dignity.